

FINDING SOLUTIONS

Engaging Dads in Child Welfare Cases

by Jessica R. Kendall, Karen Kessen, and Joanna Reynolds

More than ever, American children are growing up in homes without their biological fathers. Divorce, remarriage, and more children born outside marriage have diminished fathers' roles in children's lives. Engaging fathers becomes harder when their children are in the public child welfare system.

This is especially true when the child is removed from home and placed in nonrelative or stranger care. Reunifying children with their birth families quickly, without jeopardizing the children's safety, is the first priority. However, the child welfare system struggles to identify family resources, especially nonresident fathers and paternal relatives.

A 2006 Urban Institute report, *"What About the Dads?"*,¹ reviewed 1,958 child welfare cases involving children removed from homes where no biological father was living. Telephone interviews with 1,222 child welfare agency caseworkers involved in these cases showed:

- 88 percent of nonresident fathers were identified by the child welfare agency;
- 55 percent of nonresident fathers were contacted by the caseworker;
- 30 percent of the nonresident fathers visited their child; and
- 28 percent of nonresident fathers expressed an interest in assuming custody of their child.

National Quality Improvement Center on Nonresident Fathers

The *"What About the Dads?"* report and federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) show little meaningful engagement is occurring between the child welfare system and fathers. Using this information as a foundation, in October 2006, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services created

the National Quality Improvement Center on Nonresident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (Center). The Center improves knowledge about engaging nonresident fathers and their children who are in the child welfare system. Creating the Center involves two phases. **Phase one** identified themes, knowledge and service gaps, research priorities, and an experimental design. **Phase two** will implement a research design in sites across the country and share current and state-of-the-art information to practitioners, policymakers, administrators, and researchers.

Key Issues Affecting Nonresident Fathers

During phase one, the Center gathered information through information summits, focus groups, interviews, and a legal and social science literature review. This information gave the Center a more complete understanding of the scope and breadth of the issues affecting nonresident fathers in child welfare cases.

Through this research, the Center identified barriers, promising approaches, and knowledge gaps within the context of several research focus areas, including:

- identifying nonresident fathers;
- locating nonresident fathers;
- initially contacting nonresident fathers; and
- engaging nonresident fathers in the child welfare agency case planning and court processes.

Barriers to Father Engagement

The Center's qualitative research and interviews found four primary barriers that prevent or disrupt father and paternal family involvement in child welfare cases:

Mothers' roles in father engagement

This barrier was cited most by interviewees across multiple disciplines. Mothers' statements, actions, or omissions, may prevent, limit, or delay father and paternal family engagement. Mothers' motives for preventing father engagement range from a desire to protect the father to a need to protect the child or herself from him:

- Mothers may not know or are unsure of the father's identity.
- Mothers may be unwilling to divulge the father's identity to protect him from court involvement.
- Mothers and fathers may not want to disrupt an existing informal support agreement.
- Mothers and fathers may be in conflict.
- Mothers may be in a new relationship and fear the father's involvement would disrupt this.
- Mothers may fear fathers will physically or emotionally threaten or harm them or their children.

Child welfare agency training

Another common barrier to involvement relates to training and child welfare agency policies. The phase one qualitative research showed that many stakeholders believe child welfare agency caseworkers would benefit from more and better training on how to effectively identify, locate, contact, and engage fathers and paternal families. They also stated that agencies should establish written

policies that support these efforts. For example, several interviewees said a lack of domestic violence training for caseworkers may act as a barrier to engage some fathers. They noted that without training, some may lack adequate tools to appropriately contact abusive or potentially abusive fathers.

Fathers' situations

Fathers' situations may also block their involvement in child welfare cases. Unemployment and financial duress are prominent barriers for this population. Although some fathers are unwilling to financially support their children, many are simply unable to meet their financial obligations. Some are transient or homeless, and may not know their child is system-involved. Some fathers may also avoid involvement with the child welfare system because of its connection with the courts, especially if they have a criminal history or owe child support.

Agency and legal processes

Dependency or family courts can also act as barriers to father involvement. Fathers reported feeling unfairly treated by the child welfare system and courts. Many feel that even when they try to be involved, courts make the process more difficult and unfairly require them to jump through hoops and prove their commitment and sincerity, even when they were not involved in the maltreatment that led to child welfare intervention. Interviewees also stated that initial contact between the child welfare agency, court, and fathers can put fathers "on the defense." Fathers feel their interaction with courts and agencies is often accusatory and blaming, even when they did not harm the child.

Recommendations and Promising Approaches

The research also revealed the following promising practices and recommendations from judges, attorneys, child welfare administrators, fatherhood program staff, fathers, and youth.

About the Center

The National Quality Improvement Center on Nonresident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (Center) is funded under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families Children's Bureau. The Center is staffed by three partner agencies, the American Humane Association, the ABA Center on Children and the Law and the National Fatherhood Initiative. The Center aims to:

- improve child welfare outcomes by involving nonresident fathers in their children's lives;
- build and disseminate knowledge around nonresident father engagement in child welfare cases; and
- promote innovation and evidence-based practice improvements by developing and implementing experimental research designs and testing promising practices related to nonresident father involvement.

For more information about the Center, please visit: www.fatherhoodqic.org

Child welfare agency policies and procedures

- Create written procedures and training modules for caseworkers to better identify, locate, and contact fathers early in child welfare cases.
- Improve case documentation methods to include specific identifying information about fathers.
- Offer caseworkers training on using parent locator services, locator technologies, and child support enforcement staff and hospitals to identify and locate fathers.

Working with fathers

- Offer caseworkers training on approaching fathers in a gender-responsive and nonaccusatory way.
- Give caseworkers guidance on responding to contentious relationships between mothers and fathers.
- Promote child welfare agency coordination with the larger father-engagement community, such as fatherhood programs and

organizations that regularly work with fathers and families.

- Require courts, parent attorneys and caseworkers to explain to fathers their rights and responsibilities, while also emphasizing the importance of their involvement in child welfare and court processes.

Promising approaches

Promising approaches that may be used to enhance father engagement include:

- Family group decision-making (aka family group conferencing, family team meetings) can promote system collaboration and father engagement by involving fathers and extended family in case planning early in a case;
- Community-based father support groups;
- Peer-to-peer mentor programs for parents in the child welfare system may also increase father involvement in agency case planning.

Knowledge Gaps and Themes

When asked which area is the most difficult or problematic when involving

fathers in child welfare cases, most interviewees cited meaningful and sustained father engagement. Supported by a lack of literature on the subject, judicial, legal, child welfare agency and fatherhood program interviewees stated that effectively engaging nonresidential fathers from the beginning and over the long-term also presented the greatest gap in research knowledge and practice. The Center's research shows that one large knowledge gap is whether there is any scientific evidence to show that nonresident father engagement in child welfare systems results in increased child safety, permanence, and well-being.

Next Steps

The Center is now preparing for phase two. During this phase the Center will select and fund several research sites, monitor their implementation and build a collaborative national network of stakeholders interested in addressing issues relating to father engagement in child welfare systems. The Center will also conduct a cross-site evaluation of funded research sites to determine the extent to which meaningful father engagement results in positive out-

comes for children who have been abused, abandoned or neglected.

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Endnotes

¹ Malm, Karin, Julie Murray and Rob Geen. *What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate and Involve Nonresident Fathers*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2006. <<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/06/CW-involve-dads/index.htm>>.

Improve Your Response to Nonresident Fathers

The Center is requesting applications from child welfare agencies and their collaborators (courts and legal, fatherhood or other relevant community-based programs) who are interested in serving as Center project sites.

Project sites will:

- participate in a three-year rigorous research design to assess the involvement of nonresident fathers and paternal kin in their child welfare system and its impact on child welfare outcomes.
- focus on their child welfare systems' initial contact and engagement of nonresident fathers and paternal kin, emphasizing collaboration between systems, courts, community, fatherhood program providers, nonresident fathers, and paternal kin.

For application forms and guidelines about the Center's Fall 2007 request for applications, or for more information, visit the Center's website at:

www.fatherhoodqic.org.